The Operational Narrative in Wars of Choice

A Monograph

by

MAJ Benjamin Meier
United States Army

School of Advanced Military Studies
United States Army Command and General Staff College
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

2016

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

The public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing the burden, to the Department of Defense, Executive Service Directorate (0704-0188). Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ORGANIZATION.

1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY)	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED (From - To)
22-05-2016	SAMS Monograph	JUN 2015 - MAY 2016

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE

Operational Narrative in Wars of Choice

5a. CONTRACT NUMBER

5b. GRANT NUMBER

5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER

6. AUTHOR(S)

Major Benjamin D. Meier

5d. PROJECT NUMBER

5e. TASK NUMBER

5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)

U.S. Army Command and General Staff College
ATTN: ATZL-SWD-GD
Fort Leavenworth, KS 66027-2301

8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER

9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)

School of Advanced Military Studies

10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)

11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

The US military is strong in battle but weak in influence. Because wars of survival are the reason for the military's existance, the military must be able to do what only the military can do – apply force. In wars of choice, however, the application of force and its poor utility in achieving political outcomes has been a problem for the US military. National character constrains the US military to persuade conflict populations without force. As the military increasingly takes direct responsibility for achieving political goals without force, the ability to influence foreign audiences becomes more important. This monograph describes the benefit for the operational commander of clearly communicating a narrative to the conflict population that accounts for culture and aligns with the US government's explicit reasons for military involvement. The case studies of the Philippine War and the Vietnam War show the plausibility of the hypothesis while cautioning against looking to the operational narrative as a panacea. It is impossible to appeal to every audience, be understood all the time, and always effect behavior change in target audiences. However, to communicate the operational commander's vision is better than letting the adversary win the conflict of narratives by default.

15. SUBJECT TERMS

Operational Narrative, War Narrative, Philippine War, Vietnam War, Wars of Choice, Cultural Narrative

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			MAJ Benjamin D. Meier
(U)	(U)	(U)	(U)	39	19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (913) 758-3300

Reset

Monograph Approval Page

Name of Candidate: MAJ Benjamin D. Meier

Thesis Title: The Operational Narrative in Wars of Choice

Approved by:

_____, Monograph Director
Jeffrey J. Kubiak, PhD

_____, Seminar Leader
Christopher M. McGowan, COL

_____, Director, School of Advanced Military Studies
Henry A. Arnold III, COL

Accepted this 10th day of May 2016 by:

_____, Director, Graduate Degree Programs
Robert F. Baumann, PhD.

Abstract

The Operational Narrative in Wars of Choice, by MAJ Benjamin D. Meier, 39 pages.

The US military is strong in battle but weak in influence. Because wars of survival are the reason for the military's existance, the military must be able to do what only the military can do – apply force. In wars of choice, however, the application of force and its poor utility in achieving political outcomes has been a problem for the US military. National character constrains the US military to persuade conflict populations without force. As the military increasingly takes direct responsibility for achieving political goals without force, the ability to influence foreign audiences becomes more important. This monograph describes the benefit for the operational commander of clearly communicating a narrative to the conflict population that accounts for culture and aligns with the US government's explicit reasons for military involvement. The case studies of the Philippine War and the Vietnam War show the plausibility of the hypothesis while cautioning against looking to the operational narrative as a panacea. It is impossible to appeal to every audience, be understood all the time, and always effect behavior change in target audiences. However, to communicate the operational commander's vision is better than letting the adversary win the conflict of narratives by default.

Table of Contents

Acronyms

ADP	Army Doctrine Publication
ADRP	Army Doctrine Reference Publication
COIN	Counter-insurgency
CORDS	Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support
GVN	Government of Vietnam
JP	Joint Publication
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
RVN	Republic of Vietnam
US	United States
USG	United States Government

Figures

The Operational Narrative In Wars Of Choice

> They were slow to learn, almost blind to certain key elements of their problem, badly confused beneath a veneer of confidence and expertise, and repeatedly caught in military and political traps of their own creation. But they were not stupid, and [they made] persistent efforts to understand in order to act effectively.
>
> —John Shy, "The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War"

Even though the epigraph describes the British military's failure to persuade the American colonies to buy in to the British narrative in the American Revolution, it could easily explain the US military's similar failures in its recent wars of choice in Afghanistan and Iraq. The British senior commanders realized the importance of narrative on their ability to achieve their military objectives, and attempted to persuade the American colonies to return to Britain's control. Instead of emphasizing rhetoric, the British fell back on what they were most comfortable with – force. They were unable to achieve their political outcome and lost the "conflict of ideas."[1] In this war of choice it would have been beneficial for the British to clearly communicate an operational narrative to the American population that accounted for the cultural context and nested within their war narrative.

Why is influence now important in war? Wars before Napoleon were mostly absolute wars, where policy and strategy were aligned on the seizure of property, destruction of an army, coercing another state, or gaining concessions.[2] In terms of effects on the conflict population, the wars were so exploitative that there were few attempts to mollify the conflict populations, which were treated like chattel. As education, industrialization, communication, access to information, and nationalism increased, populations became aware of their agency, their ability to empower or remove power. With awareness of their agency, populations became more involved in the

---

[1] David Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 364.

[2] Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. and ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 582.

political process. Once a person is aware that they have agency and has observed that power manifested in neighboring populations, they cannot go back to being unthinking possessions exchanged by sovereigns through war. Clausewitz noticed this tendency, that "once barriers-which in a sense consist only in man's ignorance of what is possible-are torn down, they are not so easily set up again."[3] As a result, coercing a sovereign or a small group of elites by threatening loss of money or power became more difficult because sheer threat of violence did not guarante compliance. Larger and more representative sections of society empowered the sovereign based on trust. Conflicts became more about convincing a state represented and empowered by their populations. In order to achieve political aims, the population, the power behind the government, had to buy into the aims so that the government could stay in power long enough to implement or agree to the policy changes being forced by an external military. Without buy-in from the conflict population, there seems to be little chance of long-term effect. As a result, it is not sufficient to implement most long-term policies by force alone.

The tension between the application of force and its utility in achieving political outcomes has become a problem for the US military since the United States has increasingly employed the military in wars of choice. Because force and wars of survival are the *raison d'etre* of the military, the military must be able to do what only the military can do. However, as the military increasingly takes direct responsibility for achieving political goals without violence and when persuading populations is as or more important than brute force, the ability to influence foreign audiences becomes important. A recently retired general officer noted that "the utility of force is [now] minimal: the force may be massive and impressive, but it is not delivering the required results."[4] The United States military has historically operated with a focus on battle.[5]

---

[3] Clausewitz, 593.

[4] Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2007), 7.

[5] Brian Linn, *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

This premium on the tactical and kinetic aspects of war combined with a promotion system that favors tactical commanders has created an environment where "the corporate understanding of even the most basic principles of influence are exceptionally weak."[6] The US military is strong in battle but weak in influence.

The US military's weakness in influence limits its ability to achieve strategic objectives. The nature of war is a continuation of politics by other means, so military activities must be linked to political aims.[7] Operational artists have responsibility for the military means and ends, and purposefully link tactical actions to strategic objectives. In wars of choice, or wars that are not necessary for survival, strategic objectives and tactical actions require host nation assistance, compliance, or change.[8] Compulsion through force "is not only a last resort for a free society, but it is also an act which cannot definitively end the fundamental conflict in the realm of ideas."[9] In many cases the strategic objectives include limitations on use of force. Because of the US military's foundational liberal values, violence is not an option to force compliance on an unarmed population.

Even though wars of choice may include conflicts characterized by violence, they also have conflicts of narratives, where two or more actors seek buy-in and support from a population through the influence of narratives instead of, or in addition to violence. This conflict of narratives is also called "influence warfare," "battle of the narrative," "war of narratives," "narrative clash," and "competition of narratives." [10] In each case, the term refers to the way that

---

[6] Steve Tatham, *US Governmental Information Operations and Strategic Communications: A Discredited Tool or User Failure? Implications for Future Conflict* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2013), 67.

[7] Clausewitz, 605.

[8] Lawrence Freedman, *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2006), 41.

[9] US National Security Council, "NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security" (April 14, 1950), 11.

[10] James Forest and Frank Honkus, "Introduction," In *Influence Warfare*, ed. James

the sides in a conflict compete not only with violence, but with narrative. Commanders receive strategic guidance in the form of narratives. Working within this narrative framework, commanders must engage in the conflict of narratives across cultural barriers to achieve strategic objectives in wars of choice.

This monograph posits that in wars of choice it is beneficial for the operational artist to clearly communicate an operational narrative that accounts for the cultural context and nests with the war narrative. First, this monograph will make sense of the phenomenon of narratives in general, and the framework of narratives as it relates to US war policy and US military doctrine. Even though the operational narrative has several audiences, this monograph will focus on how it interacts with the contested population, while briefly highlighting its interaction with the enemy. This will highlight its importance for the operational artist and commander. This monograph avoids the debate, articulated by Strachan, on whether operational art should be relabeled as strategy.[11] Army doctrine uses operational art, so this monograph will use MacEachern's "operational narrative" instead of Simpson's "strategic narrative" for consistency and simplicity, even though the terms mean the same thing.

Second, this monograph will demonstrate the plausibility of the hypothesis with two case studies. It will use the two case studies "to refer to experience in general to indicate the origin of

---

Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 18; Sebastian Gorka and David Kilcullen, "Who's Winning the Battle for Narrative?" in *Influence Warfare*, ed. James Forest, (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 229; Joint Forces Command, *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy* (Suffolk, VA: Joint Warfighting Center, 2010), II-13; Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 234; Allister Miskimmon, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle, *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 102; Brian Steed, "Changing the Conversation: Conceptualizing the Fight against Non-State and Post-State Actors" (Command and General Staff College. Fort Leavenworth, KS, May 1, 2015), 3.

[11] Hew Strachan, *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 16-18.

the method, but not prove it."[12] In other words, the purpose of the case studies is to demonstrate plausibility through a dialogue between the case study and the hypothesis. The Philippine-American war and the Vietnam War will demonstrate the plausibility of the importance of the operational narrative in wars of choice.

Finally, this monograph will provide suggestions for operational artists constructing an operational narrative. Given the complexity of any operational environment, it is unlikely that the operational narrative will be the single point of failure for the military, but it is one more thing that can positively affect achieving the military and political aim.

Narratives

A narrative is a story that someone articulates to make sense of a phenomenon. The phenomenon can be historic events, present activity, or future aspirations. A narrative is primarily descriptive in nature, but can be used prospectively to influence attitudes and behavior. Because a narrative describes, any time an actor uses words or images to describe a phenomenon or its purpose the actor is narrating. The narrative can be intentional or unintentional, clear or ambiguous, and have a purpose that is implicit or explicit. History, literature, and other arts use narrative to tell stories. Politicians use narrative to describe the past, explain the present, and cast their vision of the future.

A war narrative "establishes the desirability of a war policy through the construction of stakes and costs associated with the war policy."[13] Because a war policy is any policy that primarily uses military power to achieve its ends, the war narrative is how national leadership describes the reasons for use of military power in terms of benefit and cost. It helps internal and external audiences make sense of why the government is using the military, and influences those

---

[12] Clausewitz, 605.

[13] Jeffrey Kubiak, *War Narratives and the American National Will in War* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 156.

5

audiences to support the policy. Figure 1 shows the nesting of the operational narrative within the war narrative. The war narrative provides the substance of the message for military, diplomatic, and political narratives. The US Government (USG) communicates that narrative to different audiences, for different purposes, and through different media. The war narrative is the overarching narrative for the government.
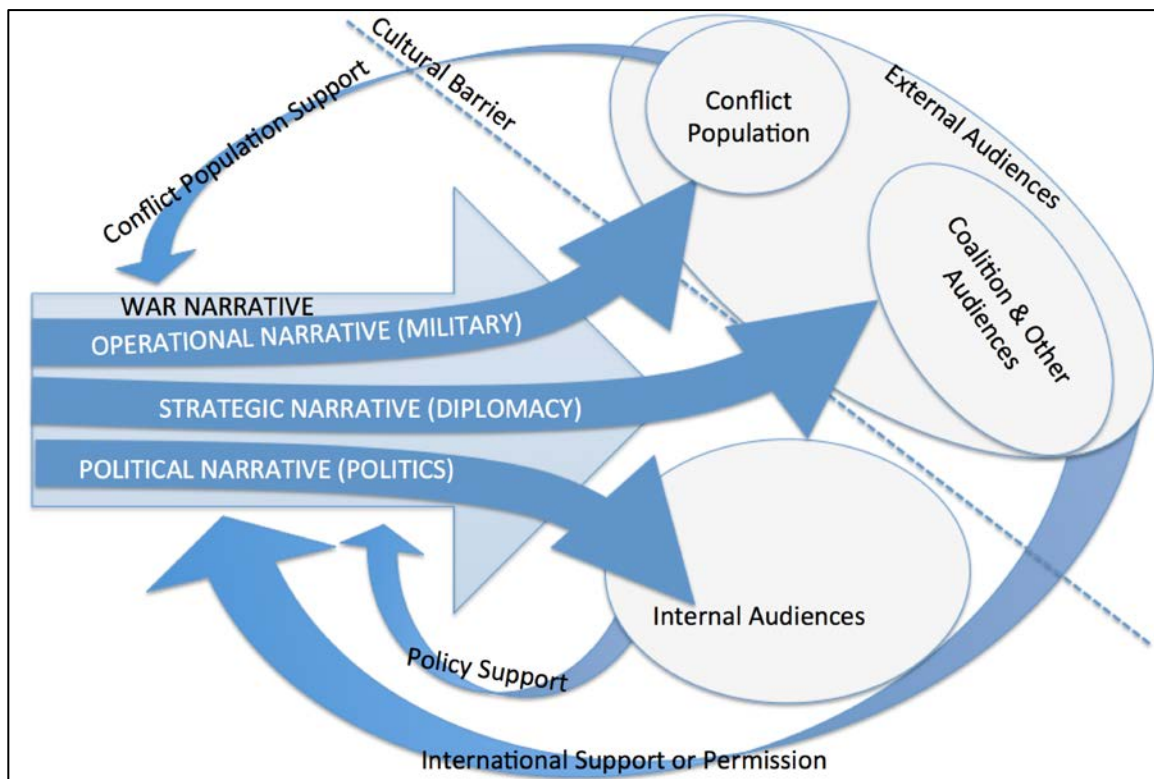

Figure 1.　Narrative Nesting

Source: Author.

Internal audiences include US citizens, organizations within the United States, and subordinate organizations within the USG. Elected representatives in the USG communicate the war narrative to US citizens and organizations to legitimate the policy image, how the war policy

is perceived.[14] The policy image must be legitimate to maintain national will, the support of the population, which permits the pursuit of the policy.[15] It is a function of elected representatives because it allows the citizens an opportunity to agree with the war policy, which allows continued pursuit of the policy, or disagree with the policy, which could result in policy change. Narrative and policy will change when society identifies the inadequacy of the policy and there is a reasonable alternative.[16] Figure 2 shows that while the politician directly influences the US population through a narrative that explains why, the military indirectly influences the US population by describing what actions they took to fulfill the war policy. Influence is a side effect of any narrative, even when it is intended to be descriptive and not influential.

The USG also communicates the war narrative to subordinate organizations within the USG. In this case, the purpose is not to legitimate the policy image, but to generate the common understanding required to implement the war policy. During a war policy, the Department of Defense and the Department of State are the primary audiences, but any USG organization contributing to the war effort is an audience as well. For the military to function best, the war narrative should either describe the military objectives and purpose, or provide enough detail to create the strategic objectives.

External audiences include the international community and the conflict population. The USG communicates the war narrative to the international community directly through diplomacy and strategic messaging. The intent is to generate war policy support or permission, and to move international audiences from negative or neutral attitudes toward positive attitudes. Indirectly, the military communicates the war narrative in coalition formation and maintenance. In both direct and indirect influence, the USG creates conditions that make the war policy more achievable.

---

[14] Kubiak, 23.
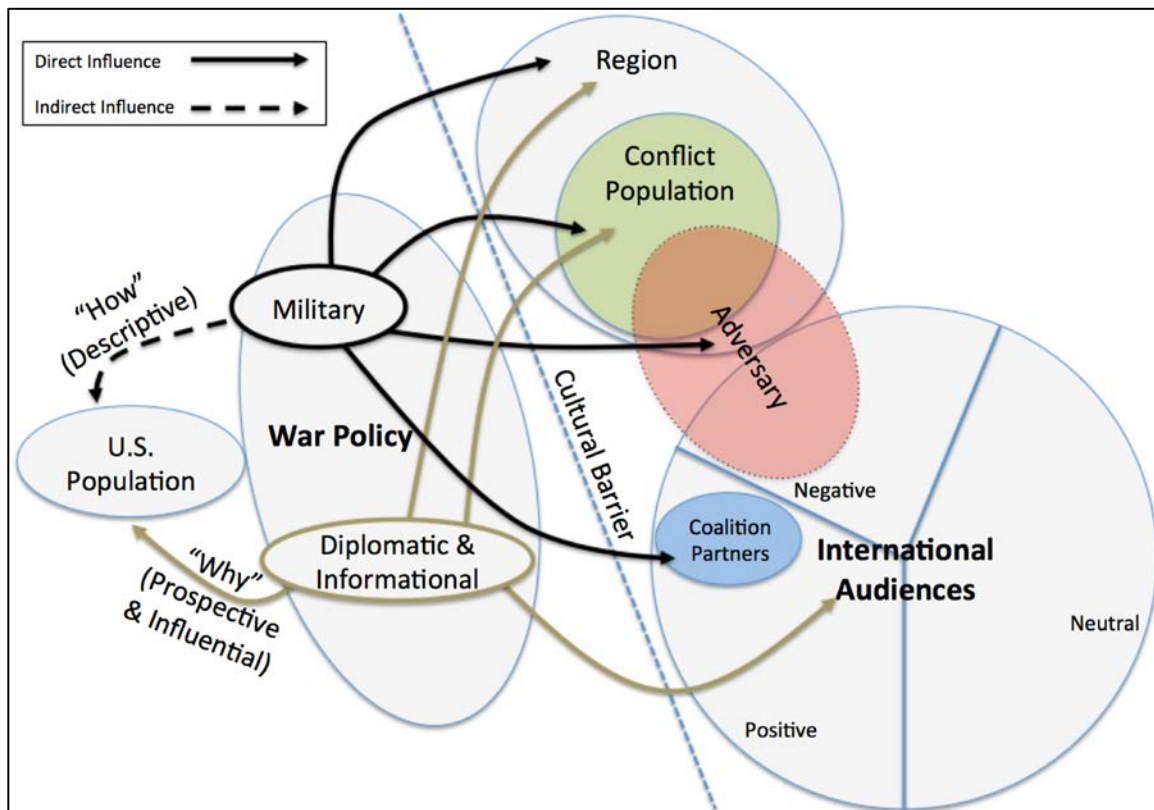
[15] Kubiak, 15.

[16] Ibid., 31.

Figure 2.   Narrative Audiences

Source: Author.

The conflict population is the external audience central to this monograph. In most wars of choice the conflict population's attitudes toward the war policy and behaviors in support of the war policy have the most direct impact on the outcome. Even though the conflict population has numerous discrete groups with different beliefs, psychologies, and circumstances, "these are the battleground for competition as actors seek to recognize and influence the different target audiences."[17] The adversary, which usually includes members of the conflict population, works in the population without a cultural barrier.

---

[17] Paul Davis, Eric Larson, Zachary Haldeman, Mustafa Oguz, and Yashodhara Rana, *Understanding and Influencing Public Support for Insurgency and Terrorism* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), xxxii.

Along with the rest of the external audiences, the conflict population lives on the other side of a cultural barrier that the USG must penetrate in order to communicate the war narrative. The cultural barrier is the difference between the US cultural narrative and the cultural narrative of a particular external audience. A cultural narrative describes the story of a culture and how that culture understands itself and interprets external actors' intentions through the lens of its language, history, perceived identity, and perceived role.[18] Also called "masterplot" or "master narrative," it is the collection of stories that connects with a culture's deepest values, wishes, and fears.[19] It has a strong moral force, describing good and evil. It is often invisible to the culture that bears it, yet accounting for the cultural narrative generates points of rhetorical leverage for any actor that seeks to persuade members of the culture.

Conversely, failure to account for the cultural narrative courts failure in persuasion. Culture matters, and is a powerful force multiplier or drain based on whether a narrative aligns with culture or is swimming upstream against historical perception.[20] If a counter-cultural narrative activates strong stories in the cultural narrative, "it is impossible to break out of the vision they create."[21] The adversary will often have the advantage in the conflict of narratives because they share a cultural narrative with the conflict population. It is easier for them to leverage the cultural narrative and avoid activating the counter-cultural narrative responses from the population.

The cultural narrative both enables and limits the effectiveness of rhetorical narrative. Without an awareness of the importance of the cultural narrative or without a familiarity with a

---

[18] Montgomery McFate and Andrea Jackson, "The Object Beyond War: Counterinsurgency and the Four Tools of Political Competition," *Military Review* 86, no. 1 (January/February 2006): 19.

[19] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 46-47.

[20] Emile Simpson, *War from the Ground Up* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 214.

[21] Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, 48-49.

specific culture's narrative, any attempt to persuade an audience across a cultural barrier increases the risk of failure, especially when the adversary does not have the barrier. The narrator must understand the cultural narrative in order to frame and communicate the war narrative clearly and effectively. Even though there are several USG organizations that work to penetrate the cultural barrier, this monograph addresses how the US military does it.

Doctrine

How does the US military understand narrative? As a whole, military doctrine recognizes the purpose of narrative as descriptive, prospective, and influential for both internal and external audiences. Both Army and Joint doctrine recognize narrative as a tool for the commander to describe the situation and prospectively cast his vision for the future to internal audiences. Only Joint doctrine recognizes the importance of narrative for influencing conflict populations. This leaves a gap in doctrine for a narrative that enables operational commanders to persuade conflict populations.

Both Army and Joint doctrine use narrative descriptively. For the Army, "narrative is a story constructed to give meaning to things and events."[22] The narrative uses words instead of pictures to help the commander understand, visualize, and describe. The Army's field manual on insurgency describes the cultural narrative as, "the shared explanations of why the world is a certain way."[23] It is a descriptive way to understand the cultural part of the operational environment. Joint doctrine also uses narrative to describe culture, where "narratives are the means through which ideologies are expressed and absorbed by members of a society. The most important cultural form for counterinsurgents to understand is the narrative."[24] Here, the narrative

---

[22] Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 5-0, *The Operations Process*. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, August 2012), 2-5.

[23] Field Manual (FM) 2-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2014), 3-4.

is descriptive of a culture or society's ideology. Narratives are descriptive, a cognitive tool for the commander and his staff.

The narrative is not only descriptive, but also prospective, looking forward to the desired end state. The narrative "is a brief description of the commander's story used to visualize the effects the commander wants to achieve."[25] It helps the commander describe his organization's future state and operational approach, how his organization will achieve its objectives. Staff officers use a narrative combined with a picture to describe a course of action or the way that a warfighting function will work.[26] In both cases, the primary audience for the narrative is within the commander's organization. It is a cognitive planning tool that helps the organization understand, visualize, and describe the operational environment in its present state, the commander's vision of the future state, and the operational approach.

While both Joint and Army doctrine recognize the descriptive and prospective value in narrative for internal audiences, only joint doctrine recognizes the influential value of narrative on external audiences. In Joint doctrine on strategic communication, narrative is "the overarching expression of the context, reason, and desired results" intended to influence external audiences.[27] This is the first time that doctrine identifies an audience external to the commander's organization. Kem calls this focus on external audiences the "mission narrative," which provides "a common 'azimuth' to communicate effectively and accurately to external audiences, whose perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors are relevant to the unit's mission."[28] Joint

[24] Joint Publication (JP) 2-01.3, *Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 21 May 2014), VII-6.

[25] Field Manual (FM) 3-13, *Inform and Influence Activities* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, January 2013), 1-4.

[26] Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2014), 9-21.

[27] Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 11 August 2011), III-16.

[28] Jackie Kem, *Planning for Action: Campaign Concepts and Tools* (Fort Leavenworth,

Publication 3-07 elaborates on the relationship of strategic communication, narrative, and the battle of the narratives.

> Strategic Communication (SC) is crucial to success in stability operations. The narrative during an operation is the enduring SC with context, reason/motive, and goal/end state. When stability operations are conducted in areas with significant adversary or belligerent activity, there can be a continuing clash between the competing narratives of the protagonists. This is often what is referred to as the "battle of the narratives." Losing this battle can translate to strategic failure of the operation.[29]

Narrative provides the purpose and end state of the military organization for external audiences in their context. It is the substance of strategic communication, which tailors the narrative specifically to the strategic audiences in context and disseminates the narrative through specific media. Joint doctrine recognizes the influential value of narrative and hints at the repurcussions of losing the battle of the narratives. In short, military doctrine understands the descriptive, proscriptive, and influential aspects of narrative.

However, for all the work that the military has done on narratives in general and the strategic narrative specifically, it has done very little to operationalize the narrative.[30] While Joint and Army doctrine focuses on the descriptive and prospective value of narrative on creating shared understanding for internal military audiences, only Joint doctrine focuses on the influential value of narrative in gaining the support of external audiences for strategic objectives. There is a gap in doctrine below the Joint commander for using narrative to influence external audiences. Even though operational commanders have special staff sections coordinated by Information Operations that conduct influence activities, doctrine puts little emphasis on the commander developing an operational narrative. The narrative becomes a secondary effort to planning for kinetic effects. Though the Joint commander may develop a narrative, it focuses on strategic

---

KS: US Command and General Staff College, 2012), 10.

[29] Joint Publication (JP) 3-07, *Stability Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 29 September 2011), II-21.

[30] Thomas Nissen, "Narrative Led Operations," *Millitaert Tidsskrift* 141 no. 4 (January 2013), 67.

coalition partners and regional audiences. These strategic audiences differ from the conflict population, the primary external audience of the operational commander. Without an operational narrative, the operational commander does not have a doctrinal prompt to identify the war narrative, to nest within and nuance the war narrative's substance for the conflict population, and to unify his story to internal and external audiences. Doctrine has a gap when it comes to the operational narratve.

Operational Narrative

What is the operational narrative? MacEachern coined the term "operational narrative" to refer to a commander's description of tactical actions to make them coherent and meaningful within the war narrative.[31] He focused on how casualties and the commander's narrative on casualties influence the commander's own population to affect strategic outcomes. Emile Simpson calls this "interpretive structure which gives [tactical actions] meaning and links them to the end of policy" the strategic narrative.[32] He highlights the linkage of tactical actions to policy "throughout the lifetime of the conflict. . . It explains policy in the context of the proposed set of actions in the abstract, and then explains those actions, having been executed, in terms of how they relate back to policy."[33] Instead of focusing on casualties and own population, however, he focuses on the "conflict of narratives" with the international community, the theater, the host nation, the contested population, and the enemy. Even though the terms are different, Simpson's strategic narrative is almost identical with MacEachern's broader definition of operational narrative. In both cases, the narrative provides coherence and meaning to tactical actions by linking them to the war narrative.

---

[31] Errol MacEachern, "Friendly Combat Casualties and Operational Narratives" SAMS Monograph (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, 2015), 36.

[32] Simpson, 28-29.

[33] Ibid., 180.

Commanders communicate an operational narrative, how and why they are conducting operations, to many audiences including the enemy, the conflict population, their own subordinates, their own population, coalition partners, and the international community. Words provide clarity, but actions provide substance. In the absence of words, the actions still speak, but without context or support. Ideally, the operational narrative is explicit, is nested within the war narrative, and facilitates conflict population understanding and buy-in. This monograph will focus on how the operational narrative operates within the conflict of narratives in wars of choice by communicating the linkage between tactical action and the war narrative to influence the enemy and the conflict population. It is beneficial for the operational narrative to align with the war narrative and account for the audience's culture.

First, if the operational narrative does not align with the war narrative, the military loses credibility and effectiveness. There could be several reasons for misalignment, to include the absence of a war narrative, the absence of an operational narrative, or poor nesting of the operational narrative with the war narrative. Since the military cannot create a war narrative, the operational commander is responsible for articulating the operational narrative and making sure that it lines up with the war narrative. If both narratives agree, then the military is credible in the eyes of the civilian policymakers, the international community, and the target population. Second, the operational narrative narrative helps commanders achieve their war aims if it accounts for the cultural barrier of its audience. This is basic communications theory. The audience will not receive the message nor be affected if the sender does not account for the audience's background.

The operational narrative is important for the US military because future foreseeable wars will be wars of choice that will require operational leaders to understand their audiences' cultural narrative and clearly articulate a narrative nested within the war narrative. Most strategic audiences, including insurgents, need to be persuaded by a narrative, but cannot be forced to

14

subscribe to a narrative.[34] Given the US military's constraints on force and the necessity of influencing conflict populations, "the success of current and future American operations depends heavily on the ability to shape attitudes and behaviors of civilians located within a given theater of operations."[35]

Case Studies

The purpose of the two case studies is to demonstrate the plausibility that it is beneficial for operational artists to clearly articulate an operational narrative well nested within the war narrative. The operational narrative did not exist as a doctrinal or technical term in either case study. To avoid the error of presentism, this monograph will not judge the operational commanders on how well they used the operational narrative, but will highlight the benefit of describing the commander's vision of the future to the conflict population in order to persuade them.

The case studies will not prove the hypothesis, but highlight its plausibility. A case study highlights the plausibility of the thesis if a good operational narrative benefits the outcome, or if the absence of a good narrative is detrimental to the outcome. To determine plausibility, this monograph will identify the war narrative, identify and assess the clarity of the operational narrative, assess the operational narrative's nesting with the war narrative, and link the assessed clarity and nesting to the operational outcome through the conflict nation's cultural narrative.

The first three steps of this process are mostly a matter of record and comparison. How did the president and the operational artist say about what they were doing to the conflict population, and were those narratives consistent or conflicting? The last step, linking the quality of the narrative to the outcome, is the most difficult because a cultural narrative is harder to

---

[34] Simpson, 232.

[35] Joshua Geltzer and James Forest, "Assessing the Conceptual Battlespace," in *Influence Warfare: How Terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas*, ed. James Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 344-345.

identify and because war is a competition. A cultural narrative is mostly invisible to a population until a competing narrative exposes it. Even then, the population may reject the competing narrative without understanding why or for another reason. Additionally, war is a competition where narratives vie for the conflict population. The operational artist may have a good narrative that cannot compete against an adversary's better narrative. This monograph will not focus on whether the US military or its adversary was better in the "competition against each other to convince target audiences that they offer a more legitimate and credible vision of the future, and that they have a better ability to deliver that vision."[36] However, it is a consideration in whether the operational narrative was beneficial to the operational commander.

The Philippine War and the Vietnam War are complex wars of choice where no single cause can explain sufficiently the outcomes. These case studies will ask whether the operational narrative contributed to the US failure to achieve the goal of a stable and independent noncommunist government in South Vietnam or contributed to the success in giving "order and security to the [Philippine] islands while in the possession of the United States."[37]

Philippine War

The Philippine War is a positive example that demonstrates the plausibility of the thesis that a clear operational narrative which accounts for the cultural narrative and is nested within the war narrative benefits the US military's efforts in wars of choice. In the Philippines, the operational commanders succeeded in their war aims. They understood the context in the Philippines and articulated a clear operational narrative that nested within the war narrative.

The historical and cultural context of the Philippines provides the backdrop for the competition of narratives in 1898. Spain colonized the Philippines two hundred years earlier, and ruled through major cities. Spain delegated authority to the Filipino elites and Roman Catholic

---

[36] Forest and Honkus, 18.

[37] Brian Linn, *The Philippine War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 5.

clergy. After exposure to Western education and values, the elites clashed with the lay and

clerical Spanish over the prosperous export market.[38] Even though most Filipinos were poor,

uneducated, and primarily concerned with survival, the educated elites and local leaders had a

vision of independence from foreigners. However, because of their background, wealth, and

liberal values, most elites did not support radical social or political change.[39] Filipinos were

multi-ethnic, spoke twenty-seven different languages, and had different religious backgrounds.[40]

Instead of a unified country with a single language and cultural identity, the Philippines contained

disparate groups of people with a common geography. There was no unified cultural narrative,

only common desires for independence and basic necessities. For the US military, it meant that

any adversary would also have to pass their narrative through a cultural barrier and address the

common desires.

In an address to Congress in 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt summarized the war

narrative in the Philippine War.

> No great civilized power has ever managed with such wisdom and disinterestedness the
> affairs of a people committed by the accident of war to its hands. . . It would have been
> equally ruinous if we had yielded to the desires of those who wished us to go faster in the
> direction of giving the Filipinos self-government, and if we had followed the policy
> advocated by others, who desired us simply to rule the islands without any thought at all
> of fitting them for self-government.[41]

In other words, the United States, after the unintended outcome of getting the Philippines from

Spain, took control of the country in order to protect it from other more exploitative countries, to

prepare the Filipinos to assume responsibility for their own country, and to gradually transition

---

[38] Brian Linn, *The US Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 3-4.

[39] Linn, *US Army and Counterinsurgency*, 4.

[40] Robert Ramsey, *Savage Wars of Peace: Case Studies of Pacification in the Philippines, 1900-1902* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2007), 2-4.

[41] Theodore Roosevelt, "To the Senate and House of Representatives." In *Special Report of WM. H. Taft, Secretary of War, To the President on the Philippines, January 23, 1908* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1919), 7.

power to the Filipinos. Just before the Army arrived in the Philippines, the US Navy under

Admiral Dewey prevented Japanese and German attempts to take the Philippines from the

weakened Spain.[42] This prompted President McKinley to view the Philippines in a different light

than Cuba, which he gave independence after liberating it from Spain. After concluding the treaty

with Spain, McKinley's address to the Filipinos affirmed that until Filipino civil authorities could

be established, the US military would take administrative responsibility to insure "in every

possible way the full measure of individual rights and liberty which is the heritage of a free

people and [prove] to them that the mission of the United States is one of beneficent

assimilation."[43] Even though the broader US geopolitical context included the recent history of

annexing Puerto Rico and Hawaii and the politics behind McKinley's statements hint at more

imperialistic intentions, the war narrative emphasized gradual Filipino independence under

American military protection.[44]

In order to achieve this, the USG had to remove Spanish remnants from the Philippines in

accordance with the Treaty of Paris, give order and security to the islands to prevent chaos and

interference from other European powers, and assume sovereignty over the Philippines in order to

make the transition to Filipino authorities legitimate.[45] This required an initial reliance on the US

military, which would transition to civil authorities over time. Lieutenant General Elwell Otis, the

operational commander, was responsible for both the military and civil ends and means in the

Philippines. Otis's operational narrative demonstrated a solid understanding of the context, was

---

[42] Stanley Karnow, *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines* (New York: Random House, 1989), 125.

[43] Elwell Otis, "Report of Major-General E. S. Otis, US Volunteers, on Military Operations and Civil Affairs in the Philippine Islands, 1899" (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1899), 69.

[44] George Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: US Foreign Relations Since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 327.

[45] Linn, *Philippine War*, 5.

clear, and nested within the war narrative. This contributed to the US Army's overall success in the Philippines.

Otis interacted on a daily basis with the previous Spanish authorities and the Filipinos in Manilla. He corresponded several times a week with policy-makers in Washington DC and with Emilio Aguinaldo, the leader of the revolutionary movement. He was aware of US domestic political issues, the global diplomatic processes that came to bear on the Philippines, and the concerns of the various groups in the Philippines. He recognized Aguinaldo's efforts to establish an independent Philippines and understood that "the Filipino people do not place confidence in our good intentions. . . [even though] it is our intention to interfere in the internal affairs of the Philippines as little as possible; that as they develop their capabilities of government their powers and privileges will be increased."[46] Because of his awareness of the context, his operational narrative accounted for Filipino distrust and desire for independence, and described to the Filipinos how he intended to act for their immediate security and eventual independence.

He clearly articulated his operational narrative in a proclamation to the people of the Philippine Islands and in correspondence with Aguinaldo. His goal was "to win the confidence, respect, and affection of the inhabitants of the Philippines" as he extended military government to the whole territory.[47] In the proclamation, Otis emphasized the freedom of the Filipinos, the temporary nature of military authorities and their planned replacement with Filipino civil authorities, and the protection of property.[48] This reflected the war narrative and recognized the Filipino distrust of American intentions and Filipino desire for independence. In his correspondence with Aguinaldo, he emphasized the "friendly protection of the United States" against other European nations as "essential to the integrity and welfare of the islands," and that

---

[46] Otis, 82.

[47] Ibid., 69.

[48] Ibid., 69.

"there shall be no conflict of forces if I am able to avoid it."[49] In this, Otis tried to persuade Aguinaldo to understand the peaceable intentions as well as the need to protect the Philippines under temporary American sovereignty. Otis clearly articulated the operational narrative to the conflict population and nested it within the war narrative.

In the contest of narratives, the Filipino revolutionaries used a narrative that was similar to the US narrative and experienced similar problems to the US military in persuading the population. The revolutionary narrative was independence from foreigners as soon as possible. The differences between the U.S and revolutionary narrative were the timeline for independence and vision of Filipino government. The revolutionaries wanted immediate independence from foreigners and a dictatorial government led by Aguinaldo. Because the ethnic Tagalog elites led the revolution, many of the poor, non-Tagalog Filipinos, who wanted to be left alone, were neutral at the outset and willing to be let the US military and the revolutionaries persuade them.

Otis did a better job than the revolutionaries at persuading the population that the US military could do a better job providing security and guaranteeing a durable independence. He recognized that "in irregular warfare, superiority in the physical environment is of little value unless it can be translated into an advantage in the information environment. A sense of security, for example, is a matter of perception as much as physical fact."[50] The US military not only said that they would provide security, they quickly demonstrated superiority over the revolutionaries in establishing security. The US military forced the revolutionaries to move from conventional fighting to an insurgency after a few months. The military also developed the Filipino government and handed over responsibilities and authorities as the government matured. By isolating the insurgents from the population and gradually transitioning power to Filipinos, the US military backed up the operational narrative with action.

---

[49] Otis, 81-82.

[50] Freedman, *Transformation of Strategic Affairs*, 20.

Otis and the operational commanders who replaced him reinforced the clear, nested operational narrative with actions that persuaded the Filipinos, to include Aguinaldo himself, to buy in to the US vision for the Philippines.[51] It was not the only factor, but the good operational narrative in the Philippines plausibly contributed to the success of the US military in securing the Philippine islands while it was under their control and then transitioning power to the Filipinos.

Vietnam War

The Vietnam War is a negative example that demonstrates the plausibility of the thesis that the absence of a good operational narrative hurts the US military's efforts in wars of choice. In Vietnam, operational commanders failed at initial war aims. Their failure to understand and apply the context, failure to clarify an operational narrative, and failure to nest the operational narrative within the clear war narrative contributed to their failure to achieve war aims.

Initially, the war narrative of "stop communism" had the objective of a stable and independent noncommunist government of South Vietnam.[52] Policy focused on pacification and emphasized the primacy of the political over military aims. This meant protecting the population from communist aggression, "winning hearts and minds" by providing a more attractive alternative to communist rule, and stressing the need to build a viable and responsive government.[53] The initial war narrative was clear. The United States would use the military to stop communism by protecting the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and enabling the Government of Vietnam (GVN). Unfortunately, the operational narrative was not clear, it did not clearly link the strategic narrative to the operations, and it did not account for the context in Vietnam.

---

[51] Ramsey, 90.

[52] Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 76.

[53] Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy at War: US Performance in the Vietnam Conflict* (Boulder, CO; Westview Press, 1986), 134.

First, the operational narrative was not clear. The operational narrative is "a means to describe the idea of connecting tactical actions with the war narrative, in order to give those tactical actions coherence and meaning."[54] General Westmoreland, the operational commander in Vietnam, received a two-pronged approach for achieving the war aims: "eliminate the Communist aggression from the North; . . .[and] assist the RVN in developing governing capacity to secure itself."[55] The operational narrative was difficult to identify because Westmoreland articulated his vision primarily to politicians and other USG agencies, with little focus on the GVN as an audience. His objectives were

> . . . to end the war in RVN by convincing the enemy that military victory was impossible and to force the enemy to negotiate a solution favorable to the GVN and the US . . . [by] wresting the initiative from the enemy, securing vital areas, and supporting the GVN in expanding its control over the country.[56]

Even though Westmoreland recognized the need to pacify and secure, he spent most of his time describing the military's use of force. He focused on what he knew best, engaging in conventional warfare with the enemy and securing the RVN through the US military. In the absence of clear narrative messages to the conflict population, subordinate organizations did the communicating. In this case, Westmoreland was responsible for both the military and the US agencies in Vietnam focused on development. The military communicated the narrative of security to the RVN. The Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) communicated the narrative of pacification and eventually Vietnamization to the GVN. Even though the war narrative emphasized pacification, Westmoreland's apparent nesting of the operational narrative became clouded after looking at resource allocation and action.

Westmoreland's stated objectives reflect his post-1967 assumption of responsibility for the CORDS program. The CORDS program focused on economics, infrastructure, education,

---

[54] MacEachern, 36.

[55] Kubiak, 54.

[56] Ibid., 54.

health, and administration toward the end of "pacification."[57] It was supposed to give the Government of Vietnam control and improve the quality of life. The rest of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) was supposed to prevent the Viet Cong and Viet Minh from influencing the GVN during this process. However, allocation of resources showed that developing governance was "a very small tail to the large conventional military dog."[58] MACV's poor resourcing of CORDS, heavy resourcing of the military, and focus on the conventional fight demonstrated that the operational narrative was actually "kill communists on the conventional battlefield."[59] Because none of the US agencies operating in South Vietnam cared about or trained on pacification, "pacification fell through the cracks."[60]

The purpose of highlighting the gap between the narrative of pacification and allocation of resources is not to evaluate whether Westmoreland's focus of resources on conventional warfare during the North Vietnamese conventional phase of the war was correct. The purpose is to show that what he said to his superiors, the internal narrative formation, did not line up with his operational narrative, expressed through resource allocation and action. In addition to being largely explicitly unstated to the target population, the dissonance between Westmoreland's narrative to superiors and actual use of resources made the operational narrative unclear at best.

Second, the operational narrative is not well-nested within the strategic narrative. At first glance, the objectives outlined by Westmoreland above seem to line up with the strategic narrative of stopping communist aggression in Vietnam by ensuring the stability, independence, and preserving the non-communist nature of the GVN. His formal objectives expressed to

---

[57] New Life Development Division, Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, Military Assistance Command Vietnam, "Briefing Paper" (May 25, 1968), 1.

[58] Komer, 147.

[59] Eric Walters, "Estimates, Execution, and Error: Losing the War of Perception in Vietnam, 1960-1973," in *Ideas as Weapons: Influence and Perception in Modern Warfare*, ed. G. David, and T. R. McKeldin (Dulles, VA: Patomac Books, 2009), 211.

[60] Phillip Davidson, *Vietnam at War* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), 354.

superiors account for stability with "securing vital areas," independence with "forcing the enemy to negotiate" and "wresting initiative away from the enemy," and preserving the non-communist nature of the GVN with "supporting the GVN in expanding its control."[61] However, in practice, Westmorland emphasized the MACV focus on conventional Viet Minh forces, which he called "bully boys with crowbars," and diminished the role of the guerillas and political cadre, whom he called "termites."[62] Even if he was right in changing the focus for MACV based on the conditions in 1965, Westmoreland's characterization of the problem as primarily a military one detracted from any efforts to equip the GVN to deal with their internal problems and the communists on their own. In short, the operational narrative highlighted the part of the war narrative that the military excelled at, to the detriment of the rest of the war narrative, the actual priority effort.

Finally, the operational narrative did not account for the national identity and historical context of Vietnam. The Vietnamese had a strong national identity that included a warrior culture, centuries of resistance against foreign rulers, and contempt for those who would call them pacified.[63] China considered Vietnam "Annam," or "Pacified South," from which they exploited resources and labor with a large military presence.[64] The Vietnamese resented this name. They resisted centuries of Chinese rule, winning independence from China several times.[65] The Vietnamese also resisted the French, who came with a large military with a rhetoric of helping that looked just as exploitative as the Chinese.[66] In both cases, the French and Chinese attempted to impose their own forms of government on the Vietnamese, who would take what was useful

---

[61] Kubiak, 54.

[62] Dale Andrade, "Westmoreland was Right: Learning the Wrong Lessons from the Vietnam War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no 2 (September 2008): 155.

[63] Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 111-112.

[64] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 115.

[65] Ibid., *Vietnam*, 112.

[66] Ibid., *Vietnam*, 127.

but continue to resist. These recurring themes of warrior culture, resistance, and refusal to be pacified were essential to Vietnamese culture, but ignored by the operational narrative.

Recent Vietnamese history included Chinese imperialism followed by French imperialism, Japanese imperialism, and more Chinese and French imperialism. In each case the Vietnamese resisted to get independence from foreigners. The Vietminh under Ho Chi Minh defeated the French in northern Vietnam with the intent to unify an independent Vietnam. The partitioning of Vietnam by Russia, China, France, and the United States in Geneva reinforced the perception that foreigners controlled Vietnam. The corrupt GVN looked like previous puppet governments established by the Chinese and the French. Ho Chi Minh warned that "the Vietnamese Communists would risk annihilation rather than capitulate" the goal of Vietnamese unification.[67] In short, the cultural narrative of Vietnam was "continued armed opposition to invasions in the interest of national sovereignty" which the US misinterpreted as expansion of communism.[68] The operational narrative did not account for the perception that the United States was another attempt at foreign interference in Vietnamese affairs.

The operational narrative communicated by the US military to the Vietnamese was that a large US military would "pacify" the Vietnamese and then help the them economically and with their government. From the context of Vietnamese national identity and history, the US operational narrative sounded like another foreign attempt to exploit Vietnam and support a puppet government. In a conflict where the buy-in of the host nation population to support their government and resist communist aggression was essential, the operational narrative failed to persuade the people of Vietnam.

In the conflict of narratives, the communist narrative was simple and accounted for the cultural narrative. They would give independence to a unified Vietnam. The US foreigners were

---

[67] Karnow, *Vietnam*, 412.

[68] McFate and Jackson, 19.

there to kill the people who want to give an alternative to the corrupt puppet GVN, established by foreigners. The United States would act like the French and Chinese invaders and exploit Vietnam. The foreigners consider the Vietnamese "termites." The foreigners disregarded the warrior culture, and had the goal of pacifying the same warriors who threw out the Chinese and French. In light of the context, the Vietnamese communist narrative resonated with the people of Vietnam in a way that the U.S operational narrative could not.

The operational narrative in Vietnam was not clear, it did not clearly link the strategic narrative to the operations, and it did not account for the context in Vietnam. In this conflict of narratives, the more resonant narrative of reunifying an independent Vietnam overwhelmed a narrative of pacification and resistance against communist aggression. Given all of the military, political, social, economic, and geopolitical considerations in Vietnam it is possible that the US military would have failed even if it had a better operational narrative. However, it is plausible that a clearly articulated operational narrative that accounted for the cultural narrative and nested well with the war narrative would have benefitted US operations in Vietnam.

Case Study Summary

The purpose of the case studies was to demonstrate the plausibility that it is beneficial for the operational commander to articulate a clear operational narrative that nests within the war narrative and accounts for the context. While the operational narrative is a part of the influence chain in of the United States' multifaceted efforts to achieve its political aims in those wars, there are many other variables that the case studies did not address. It also did not assess actions on the ground except to highlight the resonance of those actions with the operational narrative. Even though it was beyond the scope of this monograph, follow on research that accounts for more of these variables would show better appreciation for the narrative framework and better account for the contribution of narrative to wars of choice.

By way of reminder, the weakest link in this argument is the last step in the process,

linking the operational narrative to the strategic outcome. A possible objection at this point is that

the Philippine War and the Vietnam War do not provide enough data points to show plausibility

for the thesis. The linkage is too weak. The results of a broader and more detailed analysis on

variables in a counter-insurgency (COIN), a common war of choice, may strengthen this link.

A 2013 RAND study identified fifteen beneficial and eleven detrimental COIN practices

in fifty-nine counter-insurgencies.[69] The study found that the overall balance of beneficial and

detrimental practices so strongly correlates to the outcome of the conflict that "COIN forces that

successfully implemented preponderantly more good practices than bad win, and those that do not

lose."[70] Strategic communication is one of the beneficial practices that had strong support in

identifying a winning counter insurgency.[71] In other words, COIN forces that used strategic

communication were much more likely to succeed, and those who did not were much less likely

to succeed. The tenets used to measure strategic communication were identical with the key

aspects of narrative, including message consistency, the flow of core messages from policy goals,

unity of messaging, and core themes contributing to operational goals. Not only did the presence

of a good narrative lead to victory for the counterinsurgent, it was one of four factors that

decreased the duration of a conflict, and one of seven factors that correlated with greater

durability of the post conflict arrangements in a counterinsurgent win.[72] A good narrative helped

the COIN forces win faster and secure an outcome that lasted. In short, the operational narrative

is key to strategic communications, which is beneficial to winning durable outcomes in the

shortest time possible in wars of choice. This reinforces the weak linkage from operational

---

[69] Christopher Paul, Colin Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan, *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013), xxvi.

[70] Paul, Clarke, Grill, and Dunigan, 144-145.

[71] Ibid., 114.

[72] Ibid., 161 and 166.

narrative to strategic outcome, and strengthens the plausibility that a good operational narrative helps in wars of choice.

Based on the two case studies, it is plausible that a good operational narrative helps in wars of choice. Both the Philippine War and the Vietnam War were so complex that it is impossible to attribute causal primacy to the operational narrative. It is possible that the outcomes of the wars would not be different given a significant change in the operational narrative. The RAND study reinforces this potentially weak causal link between operational narrative and outcomes. As a result, it is plausible that Otis' operational narrative made it easier for the US military to achieve their goals and that Westmoreland's poor operational narrative exacerbated an already impossible situation.

Conclusion

Wars of choice and national character constrain the US military to persuade audiences in wars of choice. The narrative is a key tool for commanders to unify the story about what the organization is doing and influence external audiences. US military doctrine has a gap between the war narrative and the messages it actually uses to influence the conflict population, the key terrain in wars of choice. This monograph posits that it is beneficial for the operational artist to clearly communicate an operational narrative that accounts for the cultural context and nests with the war narrative. The case studies highlighted the plausibility of that hypothesis while cautioning against looking to the operational narrative as a panacea. What does that mean for the operational artist?

Recommendations

If "effective action is often made possible by employing multiple policies that constrain and work with the dynamics of the system" and "we can never do merely one thing," then an operational narrative is another thing that the military can do to affect the system in which they

have to achieve their objectives.[73] The following recommendations logically flow from the idea that a commander in a war of choice benefits from a good operational narrative that is clearly articulated, recognizes the cultural context, and nests within the war narrative: recognize the importance of the narrative, understand the context, clearly articulate an operational narrative that is nested with the war narrative, ensure coherence between narrative and tactical action, reframe the operational narrative, know the constraints on the narrative, and focus on behavioral change.

First, operational artists must recognize the importance of the narrative in wars of choice and engage in the conflict of narratives. Michael Howard notes that "wars are no longer fought between peoples, but among peoples. Their object is no longer the conquest of territory, but the winning of loyalties."[74] The US military prefers to focus on and fight battles, even though "in today's multipolar and highly complex world, winning kinetic battles is comparatively easy, but losing the peace is even easier."[75] This is not to say that the US military should swing the pendulum to its extreme and focus solely on narrative to the exclusion of force. Wars of choice consist of conflicts of narrative and violence. The point is that if the current trend continues, the US military will remain engaged in winning loyalties in wars of choice. In order to win loyalties without violent coercion, persuasion is key.

Second, operational artists must understand and bridge the cultural barrier, which includes the cultural narrative and historical background. The cultural narrative may be difficult to perceive and even harder to penetrate, but genuine attempts to cross that barrier will create opportunities. There is no good reason to replicate mistakes like the one made in Vietnam, where

---

[73] Robert Jervis, *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life* (Princeton University Press, 1997), 291.

[74] Michael Howard, "Prologue," in *The Evolution of Operational Art: From Napoleon to the Present*, ed. John Olsen and Martin van Creveld (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xi.

[75] Andrew Mackay and Steve Tatham, *Behavioral Conflict* (Essex, UK: Military Studies Press, 2011), 144.

the operational narrative told a warrior culture that the US military would pacify them. Pacification appealed to the people of the United States, but reminded the Vietnamese of their subjugation to China and resonated with Vietnamese fears of foreign exploitation. Tools like the Target Audience Analysis and the rhetorical framework could help bridge that cultural barrier.[76]

The Target Audience Analysis (TAA) could help identify the keys that would let the narrative influence across the cultural barrier. The TAA is a tool used by the US Information Operations (IO) and Strategic Communications (SC) communities to identify key groups and their opinions and attitudes.[77] Tatham calls TAA "the *sine qua non* of IO and SC; without it you rely upon luck."[78] The good news for planners is that the first four steps of the TAA are similar to the Army Design Methodology.[79] First, frame the operational environment, or identify the audience's actions, thoughts, tendencies, and causal relationships. This is where the TAA would consider the cultural narrative and context. Second, frame the problem, or identify the triggers and circumstances that could align audience behaviors with the desired end state. The third and fourth steps of TAA, identify the possible options and design the strategic intervention, are like the third step of Army Design, develop an operational approach. The fifth and sixth steps of the TAA are deploying the campaign and assessing the changes in the audience. The TAA is a planning process that accounts for the cultural narrative and identifies the key behaviors to change and triggers that could change the behaviors. While it identifies the key data and structures the process for bridging the cultural barrier, it does not help with constructing the actual narrative.

---

[76] Steve Tatham, *Using Target Audience Analysis to Aid Strategic Level Decisionmaking* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015), 15.

[77] Tatham, *Using Target Audience Analysis*, 15.

[78] Tatham, *Information Operations and Strategic Communications*, 71.

[79] Tatham, *Using Target Audience Analysis*, 16-17; ADRP 5-0, 2-6.

The rhetorical framework could help frame the narrative to put the results of the Target Audience Analysis into culture-bridging categories. The rhetorical framework recognizes the similarities between rhetoric and narrative in their design to influence. Rhetoric appeals to audiences through rational argument, emotional appeal, and moral reasons.[80] Military-centric narratives tend to engage only in rational argument, which misses the influential power of emotional appeal and moral standing. A rational argument explains what and why, and "is a centripetal force, as it seeks to unify the narrative of the war."[81] Military leaders, politicians, and historians prefer the rational for this unifying effect.

The emotional appeal recognizes the power of emotions, even though the "emotional response is a centrifugal force. Emotional narratives of war are fragmentary."[82] Clausewitz recognizes the importance of the emotions, noting that "truth in itself is rarely sufficient to make men act. Hence the step is always long from cognition to volition, from knowledge to ability. The most powerful springs of action in men lie in his emotions."[83] Every individual experiences and understands war through both rationale and emotion. The emotional appeal is important for political and military leaders because "the emotional is precisely what legitimizes the rational. The two are intrinsically bound together."[84] Any attempt to persuade audiences with the operational narrative should include rational arguments and emotional appeals.

Given the diversity of audiences, emotional and rational appeals are susceptible to oscillations over time. So, if the goal of the operational narrative vis-à-vis the host population is behavioral change, rational and emotional appeals should be combined with moral reasons, because "appeal to *ethos* is a powerful binding force" that is permanent and convinces audiences

---

[80] Simpson, 188-189.

[81] Ibid., 191.

[82] Ibid., 192.

[83] Clausewitz, 112.

[84] Simpson, 193.

better than rational or emotional appeals.[85] The rational and emotional appeals may change based on audience, but the moral reasons should be consistent between the war narrative and operational narrative, since it is the only universal feature unsusceptible to changes in data or experiences. The rhetorical framework provides a way of creating an operational narrative that has a prospective vision for the future described in terms of permanent moral reasons as a foundation upon which the rational and emotional appeals can then adjust to changing audiences, events, opportunities, and context. An operational narrative informed by the TAA and containing all three rhetorical elements has a better chance of crossing the cultural barrier.

Third, operational artists must align the operational narrative within the war narrative. A clear linkage between the war narrative and operational narrative provides continuity and enables credibility because of the consistency between the policymakers and military element of national power. It is difficult to persuade audiences without a substantive narrative grounded in the war narrative. A frustrated operational commander may complain that the strategy is poor, unclear, or absent because poor strategy means poor strategic and operational communication.[86] Even if the war narrative is poor or unclear, it better to have a narrative than to let the enemy win the competition of narratives by default.

Fourth, operational artists should align the operational narrative with the commander's intent and actions on the ground. A coherent operational narrative "not only enables one to convince different audiences according to the ends of policy, but also to bind together one's team across levels of authority and function."[87] Because subordinates are an internal audience and the host nation is an external audience with a cultural barrier, the media and specific words may vary, but the substance should be the same. If the operational narrative is substantively different from

---

[85] Simpson, 212.

[86] Gorka and David Kilcullen, 237.

[87] Simpson, 233.

32

the commanders intent, actions on the ground will not reinforce the operational narrative. "Words and deeds must match at all levels – from strategic to tactical," so if actions on the ground do not reinforce the operational narrative, it will lose its ability to persuade.[88] Coherence between tactical actions and the operational narrative is imperative.

Fifth, operational artists must aware of changes in the context and content of the operational narrative and reframe accordingly. Given the fluid, interactive nature of conflict, politics, and human interaction across cultural barriers, it should come as no surprise when political or military aims change, the war narrative changes, conflict population concerns change, or when tactical success or failure requires narrative adjustments. Any of these catalysts may require modifications to the substance of the narrative or to the media through which it is communicated. If the operational artist used the rhetorical framework during narrative construction, the rational and emotional appeals may change, but the moral reasons should not. Just as a change in the operational environment or endstate requires reframing, so does a change in the narrative.

Sixth, the operational artist must be aware of legal and process constraints to narrative articulation. Legally, the military cannot directly influence US civilians.[89] While this should not paralyze attempts to communicate the operational narrative, it must be considered. Also, the operational artist should keep in mind that some critics believe that "democratic governments are not. . . in the business of policing what people think or believe. . . the counter-narrative task is a narrow one: to counter those narratives with the clearest link to violence."[90] If this criticism gains

---

[88] Nissen, 67-68.

[89] Christopher Paul, Todd Helmus, and Russell Glenn, "Challenges to Shaping Civilian Attitudes and Behaviors in a Theater of Operations," in *Influence Warfare*, ed. James Forest (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 185.

[90] Christian Leuprecht, Todd Hataley, Sophia Moskalenko, and Clark McCauley, "Winning the Battle but Losing the War? Narrative and Counter-Narratives Strategy," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, Issue 2 (August 2009), 33.

traction, it would limit the operational narrative audience to the adversary, and prevent the military from fighting where "support of the populace is the key battlespace and politics is the key process."[91] In terms of process, getting approval to articulate the narrative through Psychological Operations is lengthy and unresponsive.[92] The operational artist must find ways to move through the processes and legal reviews fast enough to affect audiences at the right time, but recognize that those retarding processes open the narrative to the scrutiny and critical dialogue that characterize democratic governments.[93] Legal and process constraints often have good reasons, but operational artists must negotiate them quickly to maximize narrative effectiveness.

Finally, operational artists must focus the operational narrative on behavioral change. The idea of "winning hearts and minds" focuses on changing beliefs in the cognitive, or attitudinal domain. While this is intuitive and helpful, "it is not essential; behavioral change is."[94] This is a corollary of aligning the operational narrative and the commander's intent. If a planner crafts a narrative that convinces audiences to buy in cognitively, but does not set the conditions through other plans for the host nation to act in accordance with that buy in, the behavior will not follow. In other words, while a change in attitude is neither measureable nor beneficial for the military to achieve its aims, a change in behavior accomplishes both. The operational narrative should target behavioral change in the conflict population.

This monograph described the benefit for the operational artist to clearly communicate an operational narrative that accounts for the cultural context and nests with the war narrative. Wars of choice and national character constrain the US military to persuading conflict populations in

---

[91] James Farwell, *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 225.

[92] Paul, Helmus, and Glenn, 185.

[93] Geltzer and Forest, 351.

[94] Mackay and Tatham, 96.

wars of choice. The narrative helps commanders influence external audiences through a story that articulates the organization's vision and makes sense of what the organization is doing. US military doctrine does not address the gap between the war narrative and the tactical messages that influence the conflict population. The case studies showed the plausibility of that hypothesis and cautioned against looking to the operational narrative as a panacea.

In closing, the strategist must balance considering "how a narrative can gain purchase on audiences whose political persuasions vary widely, without coming apart" against the realization that "the rationale for any war will find it hard to gain purchase on every potential strategic audience."[95] It is impossible to appeal to every audience, be understood all the time, and always effect behavior change in target audiences. To communicate the operational commander's vision at all is better than letting the adversary win the conflict of narratives by default.

---

[95] Simpson, 181, 206.

Bibliography

Abbott, H. Porter. *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative.* 2nd ed. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

Andrade, Dale. "Westmoreland was Right: Learning the Wrong Lessons from the Vietnam War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19, no 2 (September 2008): 145-181.

Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 5-0, *The Operations Process.* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, August 2012.

Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Translated and edited by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Clodfelter, Mark. *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam*. New York: The Free Press, 1989.

Davidson, Phillip. *Vietnam at War*. Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988.

Davis, Paul, Eric Larson, Zachary Haldeman, Mustafa Oguz, and Yashodhara Rana. *Understanding and Influencing Public Support for Insurgency and Terrorism*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012.

Farwell, James. *Persuasion and Power: The Art of Strategic Communication*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012.

Field Manual (FM) 2-24, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2014.

Field Manual (FM) 3-13, *Inform and Influence Activities*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, January 2013.

Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2014.

Fischer, David. *Washington's Crossing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Forest, James, and Frank Honkus. "Introduction." In *Influence Warfare*, edited by James Forest, 1-24. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009.

Freedman, Lawrence. *Strategy: A History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

———. *The Transformation of Strategic Affairs*. London: International Institute for Strategic Studies. 2006.

Friedman, Brett. "Mass Effect: Information, Communication, and Rhetoric in Warfare." *Infinity Journal* 4, no. 4 (Summer 2015), 34-38.

Geltzer, Joshua, and James Forest. "Assessing the Conceptual Battlespace." In *Influence Warfare: How Terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas*, edited by James Forest, 343-355. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009.

Gorka, Sebastian, and David Kilcullen. "Who's Winning the Battle for Narrative?" In *Influence Warfare*, edited by James Forest, 229-240. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009.

Herring, George. *From Colony to Superpower: US Foreign Relations Since 1776*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Howard, Michael. "Prologue." In *The Evolution of Operational Art: From Napoleon to the Present*, edited by John Olsen and Martin van Creveld, ix-xi. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Jervis, Robert. *System Effects: Complexity in Political and Social Life*. Princeton University Press, 1997.

Joint Forces Command. *Commander's Handbook for Strategic Communication and Communication Strategy*. Suffolk, VA: Joint Warfighting Center, 2010.

Joint Publication (JP) 2-01.3, *Joint Intelligence Preparation of the Operational Environment*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 21 May 2014.

Joint Publication (JP) 3-0, *Joint Operations*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 11 August 2011.

Joint Publication (JP) 3-07, *Stability Operations*. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 29 September 2011.

Karnow, Stanley. *In Our Image: America's Empire in the Philippines*. New York: Random House, 1989.

———. *Vietnam: A History*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984.

Kem, Jackie. *Planning for Action: Campaign Concepts and Tools*. Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Command and General Staff College, 2012.

Komer, Robert. *Bureaucracy at War: US Performance in the Vietnam Conflict*. Boulder, CO; Westview Press, 1986.

Kubiak, Jeffrey. *War Narratives and the American National Will in War*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

Leuprecht, Christian, Todd Hataley, Sophia Moskalenko, and Clark McCauley. "Winning the Battle but Losing the War? Narrative and Counter-Narratives Strategy." *Perspectives on Terrorism* 3, Issue 2 (August 2009): 25-35.

Linn, Brian. *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.

———. *The Philippine War*. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2000.

———. *The US Army and Counterinsurgency in the Philippine War, 1899-1902*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989.

MacEachern, Errol. "Friendly Combat Casualties and Operational Narratives." SAMS Monograph. Fort Leavenworth, KS: Command and General Staff College, 2015.

Mackay, Andrew, and Steve Tatham. *Behavioral Conflict*. Essex, UK: Military Studies Press, 2011.

McFate, Montgomery, and Andrea Jackson. "The Object Beyond War: Counterinsurgency and the Four Tools of Political Competition." *Military Review* 86, no. 1 (January/February 2006): 13-26.

Miskimmon, Allister, Ben O'Loughlin, and Laura Roselle. *Strategic Narratives: Communication Power and the New World Order*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

New Life Development Division, Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, Military Assistance Command Vietnam. "Briefing Paper." May 25, 1968.

Nissen, Thomas. "Narrative Led Operations." *Millitaert Tidsskrift* 141 no. 4 (January 2013): 67-77.

Otis, Elwell. "Report of Major-General E. S. Otis, US Volunteers, on Military Operations and Civil Affairs in the Philippine Islands, 1899." Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1899.

Paul, Christopher, Todd Helmus, and Russell Glenn. "Challenges to Shaping Civilian Attitudes and Behaviors in a Theater of Operations." In *Influence Warfare*, edited by James Forest, 173-194. Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009.

Paul, Christopher, Colin Clarke, Beth Grill, and Molly Dunigan. *Paths to Victory: Lessons from Modern Insurgencies*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2013.

Ramsey, Robert. *Savage Wars of Peace: Case Studies of Pacification in the Philippines, 1900-1902*. Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2007.

Roosevelt, Theodore. "To the Senate and House of Representatives." In *Special Report of WM. H. Taft, Secretary of War, To the President on the Philippines, January 23, 1908*. Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1919.

Shy, John. "The Military Conflict Considered as a Revolutionary War." In *A People Numerous and Armed: Reflections on the Military Struggle for American Independence*, edited by John Shy, 213-244. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990.

Simpson, Emile. *War from the Ground Up*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

Smith, Rupert. *The Utility of Force*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2007.

Steed, Brian. "Changing the Conversation: Conceptualizing the Fight against Non-State and Post-State Actors." Command and General Staff College. Fort Leavenworth, KS, May 1, 2015.

Strachan, Hew. *The Direction of War: Contemporary Strategy in Historical Perspective*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013.

Tatham, Steve. *US Governmental Information Operations and Strategic Communications: A Discredited Tool or User Failure? Implications for Future Conflict*. Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Press, 2013.

————. *Using Target Audience Analysis to Aid Strategic Level Decisionmaking*. Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015

US National Security Council. "NSC 68: United States Objectives and Programs for National Security." April 14, 1950.

Walters, Eric. "Estimates, Execution, and Error: Losing the War of Perception in Vietnam, 1960-1973." In *Ideas as Weapons: Influence and Perception in Modern Warfare*, edited by David, G., and T. R. McKeldin, 207-217. Dulles, VA: Patomac Books, 2009.